

Longtime county quarry business chip off the rock

By LARRY SHAW
of The Oregonian staff

VANCOUVER — Anyone who has driven to the coast on a Washington or Oregon highway or stood on a jetty to rock fish has probably somehow touched rock from the Smithrock Quarry.

The business was started in 1935 (then known as Smith Bros. Sand & Gravel) by Howard Smith and his brother Yale on a site at Fourth Plain Boulevard and 38th Street.

"They sold sand and gravel from a pickup using a No. 2 scoop," recalled Rod Smith, son of Howard.

The Smiths bought the current Smithrock Quarry, located north of Washington 14 between Camas and Vancouver, in 1944.

The war years thrust them into a "big business" category and they branched into assisting in power line construction shortly after the war.

At one time Smithrock Quarry employed more than 100 people and was supplying materials for highway and power line construction throughout the Northwest — either from their own quarry sites or leased quarries at construction sites.

The quarry (there are two others, one on Northeast 117th Avenue near the PUD service center and one in Woodland) has been supplying rock products to Clark County and the Northwest ever since.

At one time the Smiths owned 85 acres on the Smithrock Quarry site but in recent years they sold all but 15 acres to a consortium led by Umpqua Navigation and Bohemia Inc., which recently sold it to Gilbert/Pacific (a subsidiary of Kiewit Pacific Co.).

Rod Smith said the quarry site north of Washington 14 had been in existence since 1892 when Chinese laborers mined the quarry for rock used to help build railroad beds.

He estimates that more than 15 million cubic yards of material has been taken from the quarry — which is mainly gray basalt rock. He said a test drilling of the site in 1985 was made "and we never ran out of rock."

"The rock breaks into big chunks and is very suitable for jetty stone," he said.

The quarry has supplied huge



MIKE NORRIS

Don Taylor drives 6-inch steel spikes into a 2,000 pound gray basalt boulder at Smithrock Quarry east of Vancouver as owner Rod

Smith watches. Boulder will be broken up for landscape and ornamental pieces of rock. The business started in 1935.

"It weighs five tons. No one is going to tamper with that one."

— Rod Smith,
on a block of stone going to The Grotto in Portland

blocks of stone for both the north and south jetties at the mouth of the Columbia River as well as other jetties along the Oregon and Washington coasts.

Some of the rock mined from the Smithrock Quarry for the jetties ranged up to 45 tons, according to Smith.

Smith, 60, has been active in the business since he was a teen-ager and worked at the quarry during the summers.

He became active in the business after graduating from St. Martin's College with a degree in business/engineering and serving time in the service during the Korean War.

"In 1952, we started to consolidate and began to look at local work only," Smith said. Now the quarry concentrates mostly on split, veneer, landscape and ornamental rock products from the quarry east of Vancouver.

Smith and his wife, Beverly, reside on 10 acres just west of the quarry. They have lived there 34 years and raised seven sons and two daughters, Debbie Fisher, Gregory, Mark, Jeff, Matt, Scott, Blake, Brett and Mary Francis. Five of the sons and one of the daughters are active in the business.

Grandchildren? "At present, I think I have 11," he said.

While Rod Smith begins to slow down in anticipation of retirement, he remains active around the home and is currently developing a one-acre grotto that features a nativity scene, a crucifix made of two saplings, flowing water from artesian wells, and hundreds of deciduous and evergreen trees and flowers.

He said last summer about 1,500 people toured the grounds and he

anticipates even more this year as it nears completion.

Another of his projects is to help out The Grotto in Portland. Vandals continually tip over one of the large stone blocks in the outdoor altar.

However, Smith has come up with an answer for that.

Sitting alongside the Smithrock Quarry is a large block of stone that will replace one in The Grotto's altar.

"It weighs five tons," Smith said. "No one is going to tamper with that one." He said he expects to move the 5-ton stone in a couple of weeks.

As to the future, Smith said, "I hope the kids will be able to take over so that I can retire."

"I just hope they don't come home."